CHAPTER 1

Between a Rock and a Hard Place: Negotiating Religious Voices in Public Spaces

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Introduction

We are currently witnessing a radical reappraisal of the way in which, for over two hundred years, Western philosophy and politics have conceived of the nature of the body politic and the character of civil society. Despite the predictions of secularisation theorists, a distinguishing feature of Western societies in the twenty-first century (exemplified by the UK), is that religion has not disappeared from the public sphere. Yet this is a confusing situation. On the one hand, many faith-based organizations are experiencing a heightened public prominence as partners with government in the delivery of welfare and other public services (Dinham, Furbey and Lowndes, 2009), and interest in personal spirituality beyond creedal and institutional expressions of religion continues to be strong. On the other hand, levels of formal institutional affiliation and membership in mainstream denominations continue to decline by some measures – such as those recorded in the British Social Attitudes Survey - public scepticism towards religion is actually increasing (Voas and Ling, 2010; Woodhead, 2014). This seemingly paradoxical co-existence of the religious and the secular takes us into uncharted territory, sociologically and theologically, and is giving rise to talk of the emergence of a 'post-secular' society (Habermas, 2008; Keenan, 2002; Bretherton, 2010, pp.10-16).

Whilst a contested concept, what characterizes post-secularity is its paradoxical and unprecedented nature (Graham, 2013). While we witness the emergence globally and nationally of revitalized religious activism as a decisive force; there is plenty of evidence of institutional religious decline accompanied by robust intellectual defence of secularism in Western societies. I am not talking about religious revival, and yet I do not believe that the

resurgence of religious discourse and practice is simply a blip on the otherwise undisturbed trajectory of modernity. Similarly, the resurgence of religion and things of the spirit may be interpreted as posing a challenge to modernity's emphasis on rationality; but contemporary discourses founded on the continuing triumph of reason and science continue to put up a vigorous defence of secularism. Religion, then, is both more visible and invisible: more publicly prominent and yet more vicarious; more fragile institutionally and yet more pervasive. As Terry Eagleton has eloquently put it recently, 'The world is … divided between those who believe too much and those who believe too little' (Eagleton, 2014, pp.197-8).

This unprecedented situation presents a significant challenge to existing assumptions about the mediatization of religious voices into public spaces. Faith-based organizations and secular civil governments alike must learn to navigate a path between the 'rock' of religious revival and the 'hard place' of secularism (Graham, 2013), with little in the way of established maps or rules of engagement to guide them. In this chapter, I want to consider some of the ways in which the *paradox* of the post-secular might be felt, at the intersection of religion and society, and what that means for our established conventions of negotiation between the two. The ideal of the neutral secular state as a means of framing a public space free of ecclesiastical privilege and ensuring a process of free communication in which all citizens can participate, which is one of the hallmarks of Western liberal democracy, serves in many respects as the benchmark of our considerations, as the re-emergence of religious identity throws out new challenges to our construals of citizenship, freedom and belief. This has particular resonance with issues of equalities and inequalities, as the categories of 'religion and belief' are afforded legal protection within the canon of equality and diversity legislation. Beyond the realm of politics and the State, I will also explore whether, as institutional religion and religious affiliation declines, most people are likely to encounter religion vicariously via media representations of religious issues and personnel; does the post-secular signal, then, the

'mediatization' (Hjarvard, 2008) of religion? If this is the case, then where does the authority to speak of, for or about 'faith' reside? Finally, I ask whether the association some people make of the post-secular with the deconstruction of some of the binaries of modernity - private/public, faith/reason, sacred/secular - offers opportunities to revisit the ways in which modernity and the secular has been a gendered category, and what that may mean for the religious lives and civic identities of women. Once again, themes of equality and inequality come into play, as I ask whether the post-secular signals a shift of the balance of power in gender relations towards or away from greater equity.

Post-Secular Society

According to the logic of Western theories of secularism and secularization, articulated in the classic theories of sociology of writers such as Marx, Weber and Durkheim, through to the orthodoxy of sociological studies of religion till the late twentieth century, religion will inevitably decline as society becomes more complex, technological and differentiated. Such analysis, however, now appears to be breaking down:

> The apparent triumph of Enlightenment secularization, manifest in the global spread of political and economic structures that pretended to relegate the sacred to a strictly circumscribed private sphere, seems to have foundered on an unexpected realization of its own parochialism and a belated acknowledgement of the continuing presence and force of "public religions". (de Vries, 2006a, p.ix)

A defining feature of the post-secular, however, is its defiance of a model of the reversion of secularization. Despite the new visibility of religion, formal religious observance and participation, at least in the West, continues to be on the decline. Furthermore, via the polemic of celebrated scientists and atheist philosophers such as Richard Dawkins (2008), Christopher Hitchens (2007), Sam Harris (2005) and Polly Toynbee (2005), a classically post-Enlightenment critique of religion and the rhetoric of atheism has gained a new generation of

advocates and supporters. In many quarters, the classic trajectory of 'secularization', as denoting the decline of long-established faith traditions and the marginalisation of religious and theological language and values from the public mainstream, still predominates - albeit conditioned by the impact of global diasporas and resurgent political forces.

In his presidential address to the Society for the Scientific Study of Religion, James Beckford (2012) put forward a very helpful typology of the many and various understandings of 'post-secularity', and issued a call for conceptual clarity and rigour in the use of such a term. In effect, by offering six major interpretations of the concept, Beckford shows both how ubiquitous it has become in the study of religion and in theological studies, but also how vague and sweeping usages risk devaluing its lasting currency. His types embrace definitions that dispute that 'secularisation' ever really happened; that whilst secularism cannot accommodate humanity's spiritual yearnings, neither can conventional, creedal religion; a revision of the secularisation thesis; the return of the sacred, especially in popular culture; the resurgence of religion as a public and political force; the reassertion of neo-orthodox world-views; and an eschewal of the very categories of 'secular' and 'sacred'(Beckford, 2012, pp.3-12).

I think James Beckford is setting these out as ideal types as an heuristic exercise, but I am not sure that his survey really brings out what is for me the true essence of the post-secular, which is its ambivalent, almost agonistic quality. Possibly ~~Perhaps~~ his second model comes closest to that, ~~type,~~ of the post-secular as 'building on' the secular, and where~~in which~~ elements of secular modernity endure~~,~~ and continue to suffuse public life, but in which nevertheless there are ~~displays~~ instances~~signs~~ of resurgent and new expressions of religious belief and practice.

Whereas Beckford discusses 'building on' the analysis of secularization, or 'assimilating' the 'errors of secularization theories' into the academy, or 'integrating' the post-secular into feminist theory, I want to stay with the dissonance between these seemingly co-

existent currents of disenchantment and re-enchantment. It is my intention to work within a hypothesis of the post-secular as an awkward and contradictory space, where – particularly in relation to religion and public life – significant aspects of the new context are not easily or comfortably reconcilable.

As Hent de Vries observes, trends in Western society – especially this corner of northern Europe – show signs of the simultaneous pluralisation *and* homogenisation of our social, economic and cultural lives (de Vries, 2006b, p.1). This transcends the binary of mere religious revival or sociological revisionism, and represents the unique juxtaposition of *both* significant trends of secularism and continued religious decline (not only in Northern Europe, but certainly undeniably so), *and* signs of persistent and enduring demonstrations of public, global faith.

Post-secularism is not about straightforward religious revivals, as a paradoxical condition in which currents of disenchantment and re-enchantment co-exist, amidst a climate of pluralism which further complicates any search for a universally accessible and intelligible public discourse. The global resurgence of religion and a changing consciousness of its social significance renders political discourse and public space all the more differentiated yet, potentially, more polarised, with a small but well-networked religious minority co-existing with a majority of disaffiliated non-believers who often have little or no direct experience of religious belief or practice. This raises the question of how far public authorities, indeed the population at large, should be expected to be familiar with the concepts, knowledge and vocabulary by which to talk about religion or to empathise with those of faith. Whilst some sections of that majority may hold a strongly secularist position, arguing that religion should claim no legitimate place in public discourse, others may argue that pragmatically speaking it is necessary to reach a degree of accommodation with faith-based perspectives.

Religious Literacy

I have been suggesting that as British society becomes, sociologically, post-Christian, an increasing gulf opens between a small but increasingly pluralist religious minority and the rest of society which may not be consciously secular or atheist by conviction, but lack lived experience of what it means to be a person of faith. The commentator Jonathan Rauch has coined the term 'apatheistic' to denote those who are religiously indifferent rather than militantly atheistic (Rauch, 2003). That lack of awareness is all very well if faith is marginal or invisible in daily life, but the new mobilisation of religion, its re-entry into social policy and equalities and human rights discourses, arguably creates a need for greater understanding. Hence the emergence of the language of 'religious literacy' (Carr, 2007; Prothero, 2007).

'Religious literacy' originated in the U.S. with the work of Stephen Prothero and the debate on whether religion can be taught in public or state schools. In Britain, however, it is concerned with fostering greater understanding between an increasingly secular political class and grass-roots faith communities. Talk of 'religious literacy' originates in state or public schools where it is considered one of the objectives of religious education (Carr, 2007). In UK schools, a daily act of collective worship and some form of religious instruction have been required by law since 1944; but as British society has become more diverse, such provision is less about the observance of a shared Christian heritage and more about negotiating the pluralism of religious beliefs and practices in a multi-culturalsociety.

Furthermore, the new public visibility of religion has extended the use of the term 'religious' or 'faith' literacy to apply to the training of government and public services personnel. Recent changes to equal opportunities legislation in the United Kingdom have proved something of a catalyst. The *Employment Equality (Religion or Belief) Regulations* of 2003 and the *Equality Acts* of 2006 and 2010 represent the extension of basic protection against discrimination to questions of 'religion and belief' (Woodhead and Catto, 2009). Since employers and service providers are now required to be more aware of religious factors

affecting employees and clients, there have been calls for greater sensitivity towards matters of faith in relation to everyday practice and the law.

As a Report from the Equality and Human Rights Commission (Woodhead and Catto, 2009) has suggested, however, if the promotion of religious literacy is entering the consciousness of public institutions and service-providers, it may be that media and popular culture are as influential as more formal sectors such as education. This is reinforced by trends in contemporary scholarship in religion, media and culture which argue that popular culture and media perform a correspondingly formative role in articulating and constructing people's perceptions and orientations to the sacred.

The Norwegian sociologist of religion Stig Hjarvard argues that as formal religious affiliation declines, the media assume greater prominence as conduits of religious ideas for many consumers (Hjarvard, 2008). This process, which he terms 'mediatization' has its post-secular manifestations:

> Studying the ways religion interconnects with the media provides evidence of tendencies of *secularization and of re-sacralization*, and it may be possible that both tendencies are at work at the same time – although in different areas and aspects of the interface between religion and media. (Hjarvard, 2008, p.10, my emphasis)

The consumption of various forms of electronic media constitutes an increasingly influential agenda in a number of respects. First, it locates the media as increasingly influential in constructing and defining the categories of 'religion' and 'the religious'. Second, it focuses not only on producers but also consumers of media as environments we inhabit in everyday life. Third, it alludes to formal, institutional religious beliefs and practices and other ritualized and sacred spaces and environments – physical, imagined or virtual – in which people's exploration of religious and spiritual dimensions of identity, meaning and action may take place.

Hjarvard suggests that media serve not so much to report or depict religion as *a priori* but to construct our very understandings of the nature of 'religion'. This has serious consequences for religious bodies. As secularization detaches them from first-hand exposure to the general public, they are required to engage with the media as their surrogate or vicarious agents to ensure the maintenance of a public profile. Yet the same trajectories of secularization that make them dependent on the media requires them to conform to the logic of the media:

> Presence in the sphere of public discourse is a socio-political currency now controlled by the contemporary guarantors of the public sphere: the media ... Public religion finds itself desperately needing presence in the public sphere, yet it must surrender control over its own construction, its own subjectivity, in order to have access here. (Hoover and Venturelli, 1996, p.261)

Part of Hjarvard's thesis is that media are now detached from roots in wider social contexts and construct their own systems of meaning, identity and practice rather than contributing to an autonomous life-world of politics, religion or culture. This challenges the conception that media promotes religious literacy like a mere neutral service-provider. Does this imply that media can no longer be harnessed to the ends of other social institutions; that it now drowns out other alternative providers of 'information, tradition and moral orientation' (Hjarvard, 2008, p.13) such as religion, family or education?

> ... [T]he media increasingly organize public and private communication in a ways that are adjusted to the individual medium's logic and market considerations. Other institutions are still represented in the media, but their function becomes progressively more that of providers of raw material, which the media then use and transform for the purpose of the media themselves. The liturgy and iconography of the institutionalized religions become a stockpile of props for the staging of media narratives. (Hjarvard, 2008, pp.17-18)

Although we may identify the media as an influential element of the public realm – and in Habermasian terms a potentially powerful player in the construction of communicative discourse – we are all too aware of how far broadcasting, social networking and other media are overwhelmingly in the service of commercial interests. This is in part a tangent to my main argument, but is an issue about how far we need to rethink our concept of the 'public' and how the demarcations of market, state and civil society are blurring. Are the various forms of media disinterested arbiters of public information and democratic discourse, or are they only accountable to internal, corporate and commercial, imperatives? Can 'religious literacy' carry any significant market value in such a context?

Current debates about religious literacy may place emphasis on the formal sectors of religious education or equal opportunities training, yet at the expense of considerations of our everyday exposure to a range of different media – albeit with their own commercial, political or ideological agendas. For that reason, any consideration of religious literacy needs to consider how the everyday life-world of electronic media may serve to shape us as actors, consumers and citizens in a world where the tensions and interactions between sacred and secular are more lively and potent than ever (Graham, 2011).

'Faith' in the 'Big Society'

Another feature of contemporary religion in the UK illustrates the contradictions of increased visibility - and heightened expectation - alongside continuing institutional fragility: the debate about faith-based involvement in the restructuring of welfare. Religion (or 'faith') figures strongly in the present coalition government's evocation of a vigorous civil society as integral to the reconstruction of communities. As public expenditure comes under increasing pressure, the role of the voluntary or 'third' sector assumes greater prominence: as stakeholders or partners in government initiatives, or even as an arm of service delivery. Religious organizations are seen as rich in 'social capital': in human resources, the ability to forge

networks, to mobilise resources, and to espouse the values that foster altruism and community service (Bretherton, 2010, pp. 31-58).

Concern to involve churches and other faith-based organizations in the delivery of public services, is not, of course, the invention of the current coalition government, but dates to the first term of the New Labour government in the late 1990s. Whilst there may be benefits across the political spectrum in mobilising 'faith' as part of a rejuvenated third sector, activists themselves see dangers. Faith-based organizations may be regarded as providing 'warm hearts and safe pairs of hands' from government's point of view, but are not granted the independence to challenge or negotiate with their terms of engagement (*Archbishops' Commission for Urban Life and Faith*, 2006, pp.66-74, p.91). British Muslims, in particular, are concerned at the 'securitisation' of religion, as initiatives like Prevent Violent Extremism seem to cast local religious institutions as agents of social control or surveillance within their own communities (Bleich, 2010). Here we begin to glimpse the 'tensions, if not direct contradictions, between a liberal benevolence towards religious diversity and a growing fear that religious identity could present a serious threat to community cohesion' (Bleich, 2010, p.~~19~~78). Governments are Janus-faced: 'good' religion is rewarded for its functional effectiveness in delivering social cohesion; but beneath that are anxieties about extremist or fundamentalist 'beliefs' as divisive and anti-social.

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This contradiction between the mobilisation of 'faith' as an imagined category of social capital, and its institutional fragility (or its vulnerability to co-option by the State) may tell us more about the incoherence of the idea of the Big Society than the precise dynamics of post-secularity. But I think it illustrates the problems inherent in a greater visibility of religion in public that is often decoupled from its traditional, mainstream institutional expressions, such that:

> the inspiration, motivation and effectuation of political theologies no longer lie within the cultural and institutional, ecclesial or communal heritage of the major religions or within the modern forms of political sovereignty with which their theologically ... driven politics were historically, geographically, empirically, and conceptually linked'. (de Vries, 2006b, p.9)

The loosening of established, institutional ties is evidenced by the 'increasingly delocalized, deterritorialized, and volatile mobility' of religion (de Vries, 2006b, p.8). The flows of secularization engender the de-institutionalisation of religion, whilst at the same time, State intervention co-opts organizational structures and bureaucracies in ways that threaten to instrumentalise and 'hollow out' the distinctive values of religious belief and practice.

Gender and the Post-Secular

A further way of conceiving the post-secular is as a 'third space' between secular reason and religious revival. It certainly causes us to re-evaluate the uncritical hegemony of secular reason not least in the way it serves to occlude the experiences, contexts and identities of those excluded from the Enlightenment project. However, as Anthony Paul Smith and Daniel Whistler (2011) warn against the post-secular becoming a triumphalist return of reactionary theology, we must be aware of simply squeezing the post-secular between the immovable object of secularism and the irresistible force of religion, especially religious fundamentalism. One of the tests, I would argue, is the way that both can be seen to inscribe themselves on the bodies and lives of women. Neither position provides unproblematic spaces for feminism, since one appears to promote reason, autonomy, and individualism at the expense of lived experiences of contingency, embodiment and spirituality; whilst the other threatens to limit women's freedom in the name of obedience to traditional ways of life.

When we consider the paradoxes of post-secularity, we must attend to its gendered dimensions in relation to the shifting fault-lines of secular and religious. For example, part of

the public anxiety over Islam has been its ability to disrupt assumptions about a secular public sphere (Vincett, Sharma and Aune, 2008). Judith Butler has criticised occasions when progressive causes have invoked secularist arguments for religious tolerance in ways that are dismissive, even defamatory, of religious minorities and serves as a sanction for state violence (Butler, 2008). The veiled Muslim woman who brings her religious faith into her public, civil identity is targeted and demonised as the symbol of irrational fundamentalism (Greed, 2011, p.114). The spirit of human autonomy at the heart of Enlightenment, paradoxically, actually colludes with racist and Islamophobic politics to deny Muslim women the right of self-determination: of the freedom *to wear or not to wear* traditional Islamic dress as a gesture of self-determination. Conversely, 'the post-secular turn challenges European feminism because it makes manifest the notion that agency, or political subjectivity, can be conveyed through and supported by religious piety, and may even involve significant amounts of spirituality' (Braidotti, 2008, p.1).

Similarly, Tina Beattie has attempted to make a specifically feminist theological response to the 'new atheism', observing that often the 'God' against whom Dawkins and company protest has already been put to death by feminist, queer and other liberationist critiques. She describes the debate as 'a small clique of white English-speaking men staging a mock battle about rationality and God' (Beattie, 2007, p.10) and wonders whether the enemies and defenders of religion are playing the same game, as mirror-images of one another, representative remnants of Enlightenment patriarchy within whose analyses women struggle to become visible.

In her article on feminism and the post-secular city, Clara Greed (2011) points to the legacy of modernist planning, with its privileging of rationalist, technocratic management of urban spaces? and populations. She argues this has failed adequately to reflect the lived experience of women, and is premised on the exclusion of the sacred. Ostensibly, the post-

secular, construed as the re-emergence of religion in public, urban space, may herald a transformation in the priorities of urban planners and policy-makers; but Greed argues that for people of faith and women alike, it is merely business as usual – and I think this is because despite the resurfacing of faith-based activism, many of the dominant norms remain within the male-dominated, secularist, bureaucratic mind-set.

Once again, the conflicting currents of secularization and resurgence create paradoxical conditions. Similarly, as the religious landscape diversifies and new faith-groups (often originating from non-Western societies) establish a physical presence in the cities, planning laws seem unsympathetic to their needs for buildings that transcend public/private, commercial/voluntary, and sacred/secular (Greed, 2011, pp.111-112). To consider that such buildings are merely designated for 'worship', as many planning authorities appear to do, reveals a lack of religious literacy, but also fails to keep up with the changing demands on such diasporic urban congregations that call into question the old categories of secular modernity. As Greed comments, 'It would seem that it is now acceptable for individuals to hold a variety of beliefs, but if they want to express these beliefs in their dress, nature of worship, building construction, or in "good works", then they will soon come up against obstacles' (Greed, 2011, p.114).

Furthermore, it is frequently the bodies of women that are also the sites of the resurgence of anti-modern religion. Issues of sexuality and abortion are frequently the signature campaigns for the religious right, as well as other issues that impinge on reproduction such as stem-cell research (Gupta, 2011). For many women around the world, the post-secular does seem to leave them between 'a rock and a hard place': between the global resurgence of religion and concomitant dangers to the well-being of women and girls in the face of authoritarian theologies; and the risks of overlooking the lived experience of women of faith as a legitimate path to self-determination (Braidotti, 2008).

However, since the post-secular represents a call for a more critical, reflexive and sympathetic account of the actual relationships between faith, reason, gender and power, it may signal a new awareness of the ways in which religion continues to be both an inhibiting force for women, as well as a powerful source of agency. The question is perhaps, whether the post-secular might represent some kind of 'third space' for women, reaching beyond that contradiction towards more nuanced understanding of the complexities of what happens when faith enters the public space. This recognition may help rehabilitate women of faith into the body politic as active citizens capable of directing spiritually- and theologically-grounded reasoning toward inclusive, constructive and emancipatory causes.

Conclusion

I have been arguing that the impact of post-secularity may be found not in the resurgence of religion *per se*, but in the changing consciousness of its public significance and complexity: 'A society is "post-secular" if it reckons with the diminishing but enduring – and hence, perhaps, ever more resistant and recalcitrant – existence of the religious.' (de Vries, 2006b, p.3). This takes us closer to the heart of the matter. According to the logic of secularism and secularization, such resurgence of religion should not be happening; and yet in its renewed sense of public prominence, religion gains a renewed understanding of itself and its role, whilst, at the same time provoking widespread reconsideration regarding the neutrality of the public square, the supposedly 'secular' nature of liberal democracy and its assumptions governing the relationship between the 'public' and 'private' demeanour of its citizens.

This impasse manifests in the way in which the State is no longer the neutral arbiter of public space, but has been proactive in encouraging faith-based activism back into the realms of civil society through the ministrations of care and welfare at the margins of the state. If we have learned to regard the modern democratic State as one of the 'firewalls' between religious and secular, what happens, for example, when government actively champions faith-based

organizations as the vanguard of a rejuvenated 'third sector' in the context of neo-liberal welfare reforms? Or when the interests of championing religious diversity come into conflict with principles of equal rights and freedom from discrimination? How do we negotiate the 'hierarchy' of equalities?

A further paradox of the post-secular is that whilst religion is visible in some, often unexpected respects, it remains (or becomes increasingly) marginal to most people's everyday concerns and beyond their direct experience. Does this assist, or distort, attempts at greater 'religious literacy'? In that case, then, who and what are the vehicles by which religious and theological concerns are brought to public consciousness? Is this another example of the way in which non-religious stakeholders, such as the media, become vicariously responsible for the mediation of religious images, values and representations?

The political tension at the heart of the post-secular, therefore, is this: whilst the resurgence of religion is regarded by many as prompting a much-needed moral rejuvenation of secular society, for others this new eruption of faith continues to represent a dangerous breach of the neutrality of the public sphere. We are moving in uncharted waters: how does a liberal, pluralist democracy square that particular circle? How does this new dispensation of the sacred and the secular set up new currents of empowerment, dispossession, agency and authority?

> Neither the hope of further secularization or secularism – whether as a bulwark against or an enabler of religious diversity – nor, to be sure, a simple return to forgotten religious values can fill this void. If any post-secular thought and political theology of Europe and the West there may be, we do not yet know what it is. (de Vries, 2006b, p.67)

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